Shankar Behera – How He Came to Odissi Dance

Grandfather

Guru Shankar Behera's grandfather, Dukha Behera, was a dancer and folk singer who lived in the village of Hundata, Orissa. He was a member of the Uthi Sara Theatre Group, which took its name from the place where they practised. During festival time the group travelled all around, visiting about twenty different villages, so they were well known in the area. Dukha Behera performed for festivals for over 30 years and died in 1956.

Ganjam Village

Shankar Behera was born in 1951. His mother had already given birth to several babies but had lost them all. Before Shankar Behera was born she devoted herself to Shiva, requesting him to give her a child which would survive. Naturally when the baby was born she called him Shankar, another name for Shiva. She never gave birth to any more children but died of cholera when Shankar Behera was six.

Shankar Behera's father soon married again and wanted his son to accept his new wife as his own mother. The boy could not do this and didn't want to call his stepmother 'Ma'. His father now started treating him very badly and he kept saying he wanted to leave home. He never stayed in the house very much but roamed around, sometimes looking after cows. He would have liked to have gone to school but he had no education in his village. At one time he became so sick he had to be taken to the little hospital in Baranpur. There they made a hole in his lung and lots of fluid came out.

Cuttack

When he was nine Shankar Behera finally ran away from home to the city of Cuttack. He first worked on a building site for two to three months as an errand boy, carrying tools, documents and teas etc. Then when the monsoon came he became very ill with bronchitis and started coughing a lot. For a time he stayed with a friend from his village who was like an elder brother to him but then he had to be admitted to hospital. They found his right lung had become sceptic and he had to have a major lung operation – it was the first time this operation had been performed in Orissa. It involved cutting two ribs. He had to stay in hospital for six months.

But this illness was a turning point in Shankar's life. The doctor who performed the operation, a Dr Bibhuti, happened to be Secretary of the Cuttack National Music & Dance Association. He became very fond of his young patient and when Shankar Behera was cured arranged for him to visit the dance school. He then asked the boy if he would like to learn dance, to which Shankar replied that he would love to. He was now aged ten and the school gave him a scholarship of 30 Rs per month and 20 Rs per month to eat in a hotel. At first he lived in the dance school where there was some residential accommodation. Mahadev Raut, one of the dance gurus, also lived at the school. Later Dr Bibhuti invited him to stay in his house, where Shankar lived for three years.

Bhunbaneshwar

When he was fourteen Shankar Behera was admitted to Utkal Sangeet Mahavidyalaya, the Music & Dance Department of the University of Orissa in Bhubaneshwar, the capital of Orissa. For the next six years he learnt from the great

teachers of Odissi: Guru Pankaj Charan Das, Guru Debaprasad Das and Guru Mahadev Raut. While still at the university he started to receive training from Guru Kelucharn Mahapatra at the Kala Vikas Kendra in Cuttack. His association with this legendary guru continued for the next three decades.

Mumbai and Abroad

After graduating, Guru Shankar Behera moved to Mumbai and became the first Odissi teacher there. Two of his students in particular changed the course of his life. One was Flora Devi, who later went to live in Montpellier in the south of France. Here they started the Angeli Association for Odissi. Because of this Guru Shankar Behera was often invited to Montpellier to perform with Flora and give further training to her Odissi students. There are now several French Odissi dancers in the South of France. The other student is Sanjeevini Datta who came to live in London. It is because of Sanjeevini that Guru Shankar Behera has been visiting London regularly for many years. She is founder and Artistic Director of the South Asian dance organisation Kadam and editor of the South Asian music & dance magazine Pulse. For many years she taught Odissi in Bedford. Guru Shankar Behera also has students in other parts of Europe as well – Switzerland, Italy and Denmark.

Award

In 2013 Guru Shankar Behera was awarded the Guru Kelucharan Mohapatra Award by Srijan. It is awarded to those who have made significant contributions to the world of Odissi Music and Dance.